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Julian Maxwell Hayter

University of Richmond, jhayter@richmond.edu

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Double Segregation

Opinion: On the 60th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, how many of our youth are we willing to sacrifice at the altar of educational inequality?

BY JULIAN HAYTER



This year marks the 60th anniversary of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Chief Justice Earl Warren's court unanimously overturned the legal justification for Jim Crow segregation. The high court argued that segregation in public schools was unlawful and that "in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place." A mere two years later, 19 Southern senators and 77 representatives signed a manifesto, devised by Virginia's Harry F. Byrd, to "use all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision." This resistance became an integral part of Brown's legacy.

Brown, then as now, became a mandate not merely on Americans' obligations to one another but also on the persistence of institutional bigotry in American life.

Unfortunately, access to equal educational opportunities is as much of a problem in 2014 as it was in 1954.

During the last 30 years, state-by-state spending on America's penal system has increased at six times the rate of spending on education. In Richmond, blacks make up nearly 80 percent of the public school system but are slightly more than 50 percent of the city's total population. More ominously, the Richmond Public Schools report that nearly 77 percent of students received free or reduced lunch — a telling indicator of poverty. Gary Orfield, a leading scholar on American public school integration at the University of California, Los Angeles, recently reported that the country's most racially diverse city, New York, has the nation's most segregated schools. Much like Richmond's, they suffer acutely from what experts call "double segregation" — meaning students are sequestered by race and income.

The question of who deserves to be upwardly mobile in America cuts to the heart of our education crisis and what Americans think about our social contract.

The decision was an attempt to rectify the relationship between racism and African-Americans' life chances. In ruling that school segregation was inherently unequal, the Warren court actually condemned the cause of school inequality: racism. Jim Crow meant that blacks' lives were demonstrably inferior to whites. Segregation purposefully reinforced white overrepresentation on things as varied as city councils and corporate boardrooms. By 1960, 43 percent of black families lived in poverty, only two of five blacks earned high school diplomas, and black college graduate earned less than a white person with eight years of education.

The 1954 decision eventually became a referendum on the ideological underpinnings and fortitude of American racism. An unsurprisingly large number of mid-20th-century Americans believed fervently in blacks' inherent inferiority. These people thought, in effect, that if blacks lacked the intellectual capacity of their white counterparts, public school integration was an affront to white children's educational development.

Between the 1950s and 1980s, these beliefs — and a longstanding fear of sexual encounters between black men and white

women that dated back to slavery — gave rise to an unparalleled exodus. In cities with sizeable black populations, whites flooded into suburbs. While court-ordered busing and the proliferation of low-income housing helped expedite white flight, restrictive covenants, redlining and federally funded highways made suburbanization an actual possibility. Between 1950 and 1970, for instance, Richmond's suburban population almost tripled while the city's black population reached approximately 50 percent. The capital was nearly two-thirds white in the 1950s.

The current crisis in urban education is attributable, on one hand, to white flight. On the other hand, 20 years after *Brown*, the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice Warren E. Burger, affirmed these segregationist prerogatives in a case called *Milliken v. Bradley*.

The case, which emerged from the Detroit metropolitan area, was the first to reverse school desegregation since *Brown*. Burger's court disallowed busing across district lines. The majority rubber-stamped de facto segregation by ruling that desegregation was unnecessary if there were no actual legal segregation laws in place. The case has had profound implications on American public school integration because it relieved suburban school districts from assisting in the desegregation of urban schools.

Burger's court ignored not only that suburbanization was made possible by the existence of racist residential covenants, but also that suburbs and cities are often bound to one another financially in numerous ways.

Forty years later, according to California scholar Orfield's research, the average white student attends a public school with the lowest share of poverty, while the average black and Latino students attend schools where half of his or her classmates are impoverished. The dropout rate among poor black and Latino students was nearly 50 percent at the turn of the century.

For those who remain in school, these buildings have become warehouses. They are pipelines for America's informal economies, the penal system, the working poor and persistent underemployment or unemployment.

If we can agree that structural bigotry accounted for the poverty of black families, the low graduation rates of blacks and the disparity in earning between college-educated blacks and whites in the 1960s, why can't we ask similar questions about the educational crisis now? What percentage of our youth are we willing to sacrifice at the altar of educational inequality?

Warren's court recognized that purposeful educational inequality was un-American. It stymied people's life chances in a country premised on upward mobility. In an increasingly technical economy, access to equal educational opportunities is increasingly invaluable. Yet students in inner-city schools are often isolated from the types of diverse intellectual experiences that we associate with the 21st century.

In 1938, philosopher John Dewey wrote: "The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative. ... For some experiences are mis-educative. Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience."

We have tacitly accepted the notion that these young people's experiences aren't equal and, in doing so, have affirmed the

darkest portion of Dewey's contention. S

Julian Hayter is an assistant professor and historian at the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies. His research focuses on African-American politics in Richmond, American political development after 1945, the American civil rights movement and African-American and American history since the Civil War.

Opinions expressed on the Back Page are those of the writer and not necessarily those of Style Weekly.